

JOHN BRIGHT ON FEMALE SUFFRAGE.

WOMEN'S DISABILITIES REMOVAL BILL.

A SPEECH

OF THE

RIGHT HONORABLE JOHN BRIGHT, M.P.

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, LONDON.

26th April, 1876.

REPRINTED BY

C. BLACKETT ROBINSON, 5 JORDAN STREET.

1889.

4286

WOMEN'S DISABILITIES REMOVAL BILL.

MR. SPEAKER,—I need hardly tell you that it is with extreme reluctance that I take part in this debate, but I am somewhat peculiarly circumstanced with regard to this question, and duty compels me to make some observations. In the year 1867, when Mr. Stuart Mill first made a proposition like that contained in this Bill to the House, I was one of those who went with him into the lobby. In his autobiography he refers to this fact, and he says that I was one of those who were opposed to the proposition being submitted to the House, but that the weight of argument in its favour was so great that I was obliged to go with him into the lobby. I can very honestly say that he was entirely mistaken in that statement. Though I did vote with him, I voted under extreme doubt, and far more from sympathy with him—for whom in many respects, and on many grounds, I had so great an admiration—than from sympathy with the proposition with which he was then identified, and at that time advocating. But if I had doubts then I may say that those doubts have been only confirmed by the further consideration I have been able to give to this question. The Bill seems to be based on a proposition which is untenable, and which I think is contradicted by universal experience. In fact it is a Bill based on an assumed hostility between the sexes. Now, I do not believe that any honourable member in this House who is going to support this Bill entertains that view; but if hon. members have been accustomed to read the speeches of the principal promoters of this Bill out of doors, and if they have had an opportunity, as I have had on many occasions of entering into friendly and familiar conversation on this question with those who support it, I think they will be forced to the admission that the Bill, as it is

offered to us, and by those by whom and for whom it is offered to us, is a Bill based upon assumed constant and irreconcilable hostility between the sexes. The men are represented as seeking to rule, even to the length of tyranny; and the women are represented as suffering injustice, even to the length or depth of slavery. These are words which are constantly made use of both in the speeches and in the conversation of the women who are the chief promoters of this Bill. And this is not said of savage nations or of savages—and there are some in civilized nations—but it is said of men in general, of men in this civilized and Christian country in which we live. What, if we look over this country and its population, would strike us more than anything else? It is this, that at this moment there are millions of men at work sacrificing their leisure and their health, sustaining hardship, confronting it in every shape, for the sake of the sustenance, the comfort, and the happiness of women and children. Yet it is of these men, of these millions, that language such as I have described is constantly made use, and made use of eminently by the chief promoters of this Bill. The object of the Bill is not the mere extension of the suffrage to 300,000 or 400,000 persons, its avowed object is to enable women in this country to defend themselves against the tyranny of a Parliament of men, and the facts that are brought forward are of the flimsiest character. There is the question of the property of married women. There may be injustice with regard to the laws that affect the property of married women, but is there no injustice in the laws that affect the property of men? Have younger sons no right to complain just as much as married women? If a man dies in the street worth £100,000 in land, and he leaves no will, what does the fiat of this House say? It says that the £100,000 in land shall all go to the eldest boy, because he happened to come first into the world, and that the rest of the family of the man shall be left to seek their fortunes as they like. Is there any greater injustice than that?—but that is an injustice which Parliament inflicts upon men as well as women, and the fact of there being some special or particular injustice of which women may have a right to complain—I am not asserting or denying it—is no argument, no sufficient argument, for the proposition which is now

before the House. I have observed when the question of the property of married women has been before Parliament—I think it was brought forward by the right hon. and learned member for Southampton (Mr. Russell Gurney)—that he was supported by several hon. and learned gentlemen, lawyers of eminence, in the House, and, so far as my recollection goes, the matter was discussed with great fairness, great good temper, and great liberality; and changes were made which to some extent met the view of those who had proposed them. There can be no doubt then—I think no member on either side of the House will doubt it—that this House is as fairly disposed to judge of all questions of that kind which affect women as it is qualified and willing to judge all questions of a similar or analogous character which affect men. If married women are wronged in any matter of this kind, surely we all know that many of our customs and laws in regard to property come down from ancient times when power was law, and when women had little power, and the possession and the defence of property was vested, and necessarily vested, almost altogether in men. But there is another side to this question. It seems almost unnecessary to quote it, but I would recommend some of those very people who blame Parliament in this matter to look at how much there is in favour of women in other directions. Take the question of punishment. There can be no doubt whatever that as regards that question there is much greater moderation, and, I might say, mercy, held out to women than there is to men. Take the greatest of all punishments for the greatest of all crimes. Since I have been in Parliament I think I could specify more than a score of instances in which the lives of women have been spared in cases where the lives of men would have been taken. It is a horror to me to have to speak in a civilized and Christian assembly of the possibility of the lives of women being taken by the law, but the law orders it, and it is sometimes done, but whether it be from mercy in the judge or from mercy in the jury, or mercy in the Home Secretary, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the highest punishment known to the law is much more rarely inflicted upon women, and has been so for the last thirty or forty years, than upon men. Also in all cases of punishment, I say that judges and juries are

always more lenient in disposition to women than they are to men. I might also point out to some of those ladies who are very excited in this matter that in cases of breach of promise of marriage the advantage on their side seems to be enormous. As far as I can judge from the reports of the cases in the papers they almost always get a verdict, and very often, I am satisfied, where they ought not to get it; and beyond that, the penalty inflicted is very often, so far as I can judge, greatly in excess of what the case demands. Take the small case now of taxation. We know that the advocates of this measure deal with very little questions, showing for instance how badly women are treated by Parliament. Take the case of domestic woman-servants, who are numerous; they are not taxed, men are. That is an advantage to the women as against the men. I do not say that it is any reason why you should not pass this Bill, but I am only saying that these little differences do exist, and will exist; they exist in every country, and under every form of government, and, in point of fact, have nothing whatever to do with the real and great question before us.

The argument which tells with many persons who sign the petitions to this House is the argument of equal rights. They say, if a man lives in a house and votes, and a woman lives in another house, why should not she vote also? That is a very fair and a very plain question, and one not always quite easy to answer. It is said that there can be no harm to the country that women should vote, and I believe that is a thing which many of us, even those who oppose this Bill, may admit; but it is not a question which depends upon a proposition of that kind. As to the actual right, I would say nothing about it; I suppose, however, the country has a right to determine how it will be governed—whether by one man, whether by few, or whether by many. Many men in Britain are, by their official or professional position, deprived by law of the privilege of voting, notwithstanding their property qualification. Many men, on the other hand, are entitled to vote although possessed of no property qualification of any kind. The intelligence and the experience and the opinion of the country must decide where the power must rest, and upon whom the suffrage shall be conferred.

The hon. and learned gentleman opposite (Mr. Forsyth) told us that unless this Bill passed there would be a class injured and discontented, and reference has been made to the condition of the agricultural labourer. But I think there is no comparison between the two cases. If the landowners could only vote, the tenants would have a right to complain, and if the landowners and the tenants only voted, the labourer would have a right to complain. The landlord, no doubt, has interests different in many respects from the tenant, and the tenant and the landlord different from the labourers, and if a whole class like the agricultural labourers, or like the agricultural tenants, were shut out they would have a right to be discontented and to complain of the injustice or unwisdom of Parliament. So with regard to merchants, manufacturers, and their workpeople.

But the great mistake is in arguing that women are a class. Why, the honourable and learned gentleman, the member for Marylebone, who, being a lawyer of eminence and a great scholar, ought to be able to define rather more accurately, spoke more than once in the course of his speech of women as a class; nothing can be more monstrous or absurd than such an appellation for women. Why, sir, women, so to speak, are everywhere, not in a class as agricultural labourers or factory workers, but they are in your highest, your middle, your humblest ranks; they are our mothers, our wives, our sisters, and our daughters; they are as ourselves. We care as much for them sitting in this House as members of Parliament and as legislators for the country, as for ourselves, and they are as near our hearts here as in our homes and our families. I venture to say that it is a scandalous and an odious libel to say that women are a class, and that therefore they are excluded from our sympathy, and that Parliament can do no justice, or rather would do any injustice, in regard to them. If there be any fact which seems at any time to contradict this, I am sure it can arise only from the ignorance of Parliament; and that fair discussion, such as we bring to bear upon all questions, will at no remote period, but at an early period, do all the justice which it is in the power of Parliament to do. So much, then, with regard to these political wrongs. I do not believe that the women of England suffer in the least

from not having what is called direct representation in this House. Politically, I believe it would be no advantage if they were so represented.

Now, I dismiss altogether the question of what may be called political wrongs, and come to consider whether this Bill has in it more than that which you read in its clauses. Some one has said in the course of the debate that there would be about 380,000 or 400,000 voters added by its passing to the present constituencies, about 13 per cent. But the Bill, unfortunately for those who argue about political wrongs, excludes by far the greatest portion of women, and excludes those specially who, if there be any special qualification required for an elector, may be said to specially qualified—that is, the married women. They are older, they are, on the whole, generally better informed; they have greater interests at stake, and yet they are excluded. But then it is said by those outside, not by their friends here—the right honourable gentleman, the member for Halifax (Mr. Stansfield) went so far as to deny what I am about to say altogether, in which I think he was inaccurate and very injudicious—it is said outside that this Bill is an instalment only, that it is but one step in the path of the redemption of women. Now, if that be so, it is very odd that those most concerned in the Bill do not appear to be aware of it, because I find that last year, or the year before, there was a general dispute on this matter. The honourable and learned member for Marylebone will himself acknowledge that he knows that he has only very partially the confidence of his clients; they go with him, or he goes with them, in a certain direction, and they know that at the next milestone or at some point to be approached by this Bill, they are to part company, and instead of having to listen to half an hour's or three quarters of an hour's pleasant speech on behalf of his present clients we shall have, no doubt, to listen to a speech of equal length to show that he has gone so far that nothing could be more perilous than an attempt to go any further. Last year I recollect reading, in a newspaper which is supposed to represent the opinions in some degree of a member of this House who warmly sympathises with the cause of those who promote this Bill, a letter which I will read because it does not say much more than

is generally held by the warmest supporters of this Bill. It says :

Married women cannot claim to vote as householders, but why should not they, as well as men, vote as lodgers ? Since the law recognizes none but a direct payment for lodgings as conferring the franchise, why should not a married woman who desires it, and who possesses money independent of her husband, pay him for her lodging ? Married women devoid of means could not make such an arrangement ; but let us say, for argument's sake, suppose a wife's position is by English law established the most abject possible for a human being, short of absolute slavery, that she is a servant, differing from and better than a slave only inasmuch as her servitude is voluntarily assumed at her will, still by the law she retains the right to appraise her services and to stipulate for her remuneration before she accepts a master, and that remuneration might enable her to constitute herself a lodger.

The lady who writes this—if she be a lady—then says :

If the money value falls short of the requirements of the franchise, it is just that she, like men similarly poor, should not possess a vote.

That is signed "A Married Claimant to the Franchise," and I believe, though in broader terms, that it expresses very much the kind of extravagant desire there is—I admit it is only on the part of a few women—that this Bill should pass, and that other Bills naturally and logically following it, should at some future time pass. Now in discussing this question I am much more anxious to lay before the House the doubts and difficulties that I feel than to say anything very strong either against the measure or against those who propose it. But I should like to ask two or three questions. How, for example, if this Bill passes, will you contend against further claims ? When I was accustomed, and friends with me, to ask the House to extend the franchise to the householders to any point below the existing franchise there were those who argued in this way : "Well, but this will not settle the question, you will want more. Very likely you will go on to universal suffrage, or what is called manhood suffrage." But if we did go on to that we introduced no new principle ; we understood what votes were and that the alteration effected no

great change or social revolution of any kind. But when you come to this question of giving votes to women, although the claim may appear irresistible at some time—to some men—I am not going to set my opinion against those who differ from me—Parliament ought to have the sense to try and understand where it is going and what it is intending to do. If this Bill passes, what will be the question asked of this House by some honourable members whom I need not name? They will say very reasonably, “Shall marriage be a political disqualification? You have given a vote for all young women who are unmarried who occupy a house and have property, and to all old women who are widows, who occupy a house and have property, what do you say to those who compose, it may be nine-tenths, of the whole, or a very large proportion—what do you say to them? They have votes until they marry, but the moment they come out of church or chapel, though they may bring fortunes to their husbands”—and the supporters of this Bill are very anxious that the property should be separate—“yet the moment the marriage takes place the lady’s vote merges and the husband becomes the elector.” Having first granted this, that women shall vote, how can you answer any man who says, “Shall marriage disqualify? and if the unmarried vote, shall the married be disfranchised?” It seems to me that if you pass this Bill, and you go no further, what Mr. Mill called the “subjection of women” will be established. Then I would ask another question. If all men, being electors and householders, have a right to be elected, if the constituency choose to elect them, upon what principle is it that women should not have a right to be elected? These are reasonable questions, and we who are asked to pass this Bill, but who oppose it and doubt its wisdom, have a right to ask these questions and to have answers to them. If we are to travel this path, let us know how far we are going and to what it leads. I have always had a great sympathy with a wide suffrage and have now; but still I want to know, if we are embarking on an entirely new career, what sort of weather we are to have and what is the haven to which we are about to steer, if we grant that every woman, whether married or unmarried, shall have a vote.

The hon. member for Mid-Lincolnshire (Mr. Chaplin) referred

to what would happen if this Bill were passed, namely that in every house there would be a double vote. If the parties were agreed it would make no difference at an election. If they were not agreed, it had been suggested that you might introduce discord into every family, if not between man and wife, certainly between the parents and children—the brothers, as had been said, taking the part of their mother, and the sisters that of their father. In any case you would have discord in the house, and an amount of social evil which surely the friends of this measure do not contemplate, and which cannot arise under the present system. Now, we in this House have one peculiar knowledge, that is, of the penalties which we pay for our constitutional freedom. There are many hon. gentlemen in this House who cannot look back upon their electioneering experience without feelings of regret, and I am afraid there are some who must look back with feelings of humiliation. Now I should like to ask the House whether it is desirable to introduce our mothers and wives and sisters and daughters into the excitement and the turmoil, and it may be into the very humiliation, which seems in every country so far to attend a system of Parliamentary representation, whether it be in the United States, where so many systems are tried, or whether in this country, or in France, of which we recently have had an example. We see there how much there is that candidates can scarcely avoid, yet must greatly deplore; and we are asked to introduce the women of England into a system like this, from which we can hardly extract ourselves without taint and pollution, and which we look back upon even with shame and disgust. I will not say that women would be very likely to be more tainted in this manner than we are; but I believe there have been some experiences even since the Municipal Act gave them votes. I know one place in my own neighbourhood where scenes of the most shocking character took place; and in another borough not far from where I live, whose member or members voted for this Bill, at a recent municipal contest women were served with what certainly was not wholesome or good for them during the morning and forenoon until they had been polled. I know at another borough in Lancashire at the last General Election there were women, by hundreds, I am

told, but at any rate in great numbers, drunk and disgraced under the temptations that were offered in the fierceness and unscrupulousness of a political contest. The honourable member for North Warwickshire (Mr. Newdegate) referred to the Catholic question, to the influence that might be exercised by the Catholic priest. I will not go into that further than to say that every man in this House must be sensible, and those who are in favour of this Bill have never ventured to deny, that the influence of priest, parson and minister would be greatly increased if this Bill and other measures of a similar character were passed. I recollect last year discussing this Bill with a gentleman who was a member of a former Parliament and a member for an Irish constituency—I rather think he supported this Bill, but I am not quite sure—and he said, “One thing you may rely on, that in Catholic Ireland every woman’s vote may be taken to be the priest’s vote.” Hon. members who come from Ireland may contradict this, and they are much better authorities on the subject than I am. But I do not give it on my own authority. I give it on the authority of one of their own members in a previous Parliament, a man equal to any member for an Irish constituency or an English either, a gentleman of knowledge and veracity in a matter of this kind. All these risks and all this great change we are asked to make—for what? To arm the women of this country against the men of this country. To arm them that they may defend themselves against their fathers, their husbands, their brothers and their sons. To me the idea has something in it strange and monstrous, and I think a more baseless case—that is, on the ground of any suffered injustice—was never submitted to this House. I believe that if everybody voted, if all women and all men voted, the general result must be the same; for by an unalterable law, strength is stronger than weakness, and in the end, as a matter of absolute necessity, men must prevail.

My sympathies have always been in favour of a wide suffrage. They are so at this moment, and I grieve very much that a measure should be submitted to this House in favour of the extension of the suffrage, to which I cannot give my support. But I confess I am unwilling, for the sake of women themselves, to intro-

duce them into the contest of our Parliamentary system, to bring them under the necessity of canvassing themselves or being canvassed by others. I think they would lose much of that, or some of that which is the best that they now possess, and that they would gain no good of any kind from being mingled or mixed with Parliamentary contests and the polling-booth. I should vote for this measure if I were voting solely in the interests of the men. I shall vote against it I believe with perfect honesty, believing in doing so that I am serving the interests of women themselves. I recollect that an hon. member who voted for this Bill last year, in conversation with me next day said that, though he did so, he had very great doubts upon the matter, because he believed that the best women were against it. Well, Sir, I find also, wherever I go, that all the best women seem to be against this Bill. If the House believes that it cannot deal justly for our mothers, our sisters, our wives and our daughters, the House may abdicate and pass this Bill, but I believe that Parliament cannot be otherwise—unless it be in ignorance—cannot be otherwise than just to the women of this country, with whom we are so intimately allied. Believing that, and having these doubts—doubts which are stronger even than I have been able to express, and doubts which have come upon me stronger and stronger the more I have considered this question, I am obliged, differing from some of those whom I care for and whom I love, to give my vote in opposition to this measure.

The following correspondence, which appeared in the *London Times* January 7th, 1889, may be regarded as a sort of sequel to the foregoing speech:—

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "TIMES."

SIR,—It is not, I think, generally known that Mr. John Bright is opposed to the extension of the Parliamentary franchise to women. As it appears improbable that the venerable statesman

will again be permitted to take part in political debates, I forward you a letter he addressed to Mr. Theodore Stanton upwards of six years ago upon the above subject; I take the letter from Mr. Stanton's book entitled "The Woman Question in Europe," a work not much read by the public.

The time has come when this subject must be met with firm and unflinching resistance. Men have been too indifferent respecting the aggrandisement of women. There is no end to the inordinate demands of the band of heady women who claim to be but are not really the representatives of their sex. The admission that women are ignorant of politics, and the suggestion that political lectures should be given by women to women, prove that women in general are utterly indifferent about having the right to vote. Mrs. Ashton-Dilke was constrained to admit that all power would be placed in the hands of women if the franchise were extended to both married and single women, and it must be remembered that if the franchise were given to women it could not be taken from them.

I implore our leading men to address themselves to this question when on the platform, and not leave it untouched till it arises in Parliament. Give political power to women and national disintegration will be the result. The increase of crime and drunkenness among my sex for some years past prove that as women's intercourse with worldly affairs extends so will their moral declension become greater.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

January 4, 1889.

AN ENGLISHWOMAN.

"One Ash, Rochdale, Oct. 21st, 1882.

"Dear Sir,—I have never changed my opinion on the subject of Women's Suffrage. I voted with great doubt and reluctance with Mr. Mill, and more out of sympathy with him than from agreement with him on the subject before us. I have always regretted the vote, and explained the whole matter in a speech against women's suffrage in a subsequent Session of Parliament. I cannot give you the date of the speech, but it is fully reported

in 'Hansard's Debates.' I cannot give you all the reasons for the view I take, but I act from a belief that to introduce women into the strife of political life would be a great evil to them, and that to our sex no possible good could arrive. If women are not safe under the charge and care of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, it is the fault of our non-civilization and not our laws. As civilization founded upon Christian principle advances, women will gain all that is right for them, although they are not seen contending in the strife of political parties. In my experience I have observed evil results to many women who have entered hotly into political conflict and discussion. I would save them from it. If all the men in a nation do not and cannot adequately express its will and defend its interests, to add all the women will not better the result, and the representative system is a mistake. But I cannot discuss the question in a note. I give you an idea merely of the view I take of it. There is more in my speech, but even that very lightly touches upon the whole subject.

"I am, respectfully yours,

"JOHN BRIGHT.

"Theodore Stanton, Esq."
